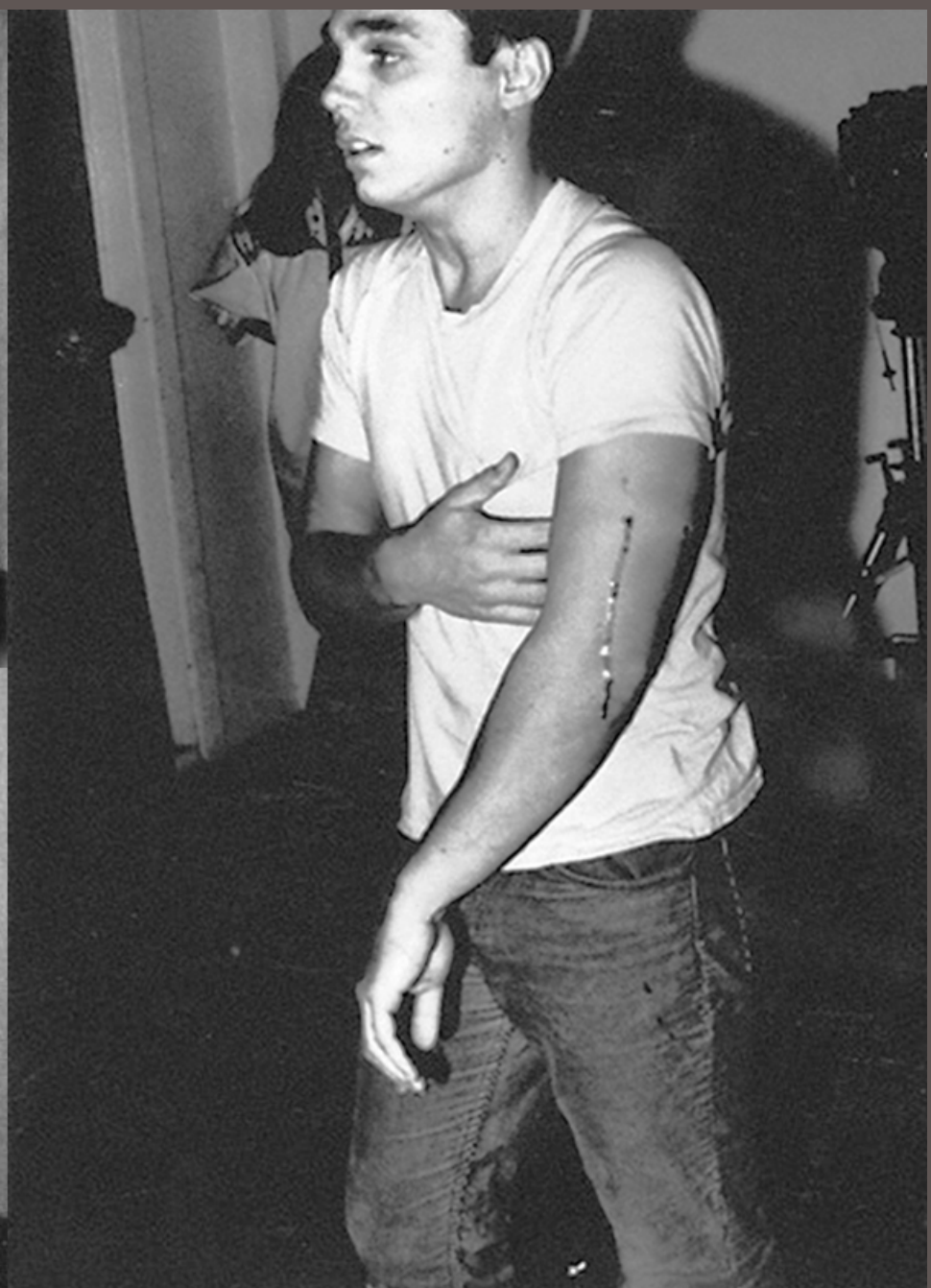


REAL CRUEL

AN ATTEMPT TO FIND NUANCE
THROUGH CRUELTY AND IT'S PROTRAYAL



CHRIS BURDEN - SHOOT
1971

INTRODUCTION

In 'REAL CRUEL' a try to examine my sympathetic preoccupation and care for cruelty. Though I am thoroughly aware that a large portion of what we might label as 'cruel' is abject, sadistic or downright evil, I do suspect that there is a chunk of cruelty that does not deal with those categories per se. There might be a type of pure cruelty that might bring about transformation, purgation or relief through the guise of sadism or villainy.

Before delving too deep into the different methods of cruelty -- I would first like to contextualise my research. It might be the contrarian in me, the deviant, but in the current contemporary cultural climate, I find myself often confronted with a particular type of cultural ideology. It's a way of dealing with art-making that appears to be ubiquitous, be it in cinema or gallery spaces, literature and theatre. The reigning, and in my opinion dogmatic reigning ideology is that of relational aesthetics. The term relational aesthetics coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in the 90s signifies a tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations. Others have called it conversational art/community-based art or dialogical art. Most works are focused on the engagement of communities, facilitating peaceful dialogues between the participants.

The artist is often seen more as a catalyst to the work, instead of being an auteur of it. Though there is much to admire in this way of working, there is also much to question. I find that most relational aesthetics-oriented works fail to challenge nor amaze me. They are focussed on healing. Didactical in nature. The main goal of the relational aesthetics school of thought is to eradicate or otherwise minimise the amount of destruction, aggression, miscommunication and cruelty in the world. I wonder what would happen if instead of reducing the cruelty in the cultural climate, we would facilitate and explore it.

I suspect that the relational aesthetics method has thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Though a lot of brutality and cruelty is unproductive, upheld and propelled by nothing but stupidity. The aim of eliminating it makes sense. But not all that appears brutal or cruel also truly is. One might even regard the compassion conjured up as counterproductive and belittling. In REAL CRUEL I intend to explore if there are still facts of cruelty that are worth dissecting and presenting. That might bring out other ways of seeing that up until recently have been buried by the relational aesthetics wave. I suspect there is plenty to discover behind the paywall of uncomfortability and cruelty.



QUEEN FOR A DAY
TV-PROGRAM ON NBC
1965

FORMAT

The thesis will be written by me. I'll attempt to be succinct, but also give my wandering mind space to roam freely. The text will be divided up into three sections. An introductory chapter regarding the what and why? A main chunk where I'll look into different modes of cruelty and find apt examples through the many references I've gathered over time. And I'll end with a more critical look into the relation of the audience to brutality and cruelty, simulated and real. My original plan to orchestrate an amount of interviews that I would have with experts within the field of cruelty -- transcribe them -- and then butcher the interviews into something totally new -- and thus enacting cruelty on those who were interviewed -- is still appealing to me. However I find myself in a world where I have too little time to write as is. My thesis, short film script and regular work take up so much time that the productional efforts of arranging so many interviews in such a short amount of time will only complicate the matter instead of uplift it. I will not let go of this idea, but it might not be the most practical in regard to the thesis writing. A more traditional thesis set-up might offer me the most.

I intend to open the thesis with an introductory chapter dealing with my intentions of dissecting the idea of cruelty.

What do I, and others, mean when we speak of cruelty? Won't prolonged exposure to brutality make us more brutal? Can we come to a definition of what kinds of depictions of cruelty are worthwhile, and which ones are gratuitous or categorically evil?

Most of what I will be writing about is concerned with the idea of moral complexity, that in an insta-fied and polarised world you are often forced to be for or against something. I strongly believe that truth and meaning are found not on either side of the extreme, but one needs to wade through the murky swamp of conflicting opinions, getting intimate with discomfort and developing an attitude for nuance. Counterintuitively enough, my study in cruelty will, I suspect, be a study in nuance. Something I will need to explain before delving into the wide array of thematic cruelties.

In the second chapter, I'll discuss a wide array of artists, filmmakers and philosophers who have dealt in their work with the notion of cruelty. I suspect I'll start with Antonin Artaud, the French playwright behind the 'theatre of cruelty' who spoke about cruelty in art signifies 'rigour, implacable intention and decision, and irreversible and absolute determination. He built on the foundations laid down many centuries before him, on the back of Aristotle and the idea of Catharsis.

The bulk of my thesis will be a yet-to-be-determined categorisation of types of cruelties. I'll research art and phenomena that seeks out discovery, confronting surfaces begging to be shattered, platitudes that need rewriting -- where cruelty is the mechanism of that breakage. I'll talk about people like Chris Burden with his performance 'SHOOT' (1971) where he had himself shot in the arm by a friend or Ana Mendieta who took off her clothes, covered herself with blood and tied herself up-- and then invited people to her apartment, thus recreating a rape whose brutality had upset the entire university where she studied at the time. (12 years after that Mendieta died a violent death for which her husband of eight months was tried and acquitted) or Santiago Sierra who offered prostitutes in Mexico City heroin in exchange for tattooing a line across their backs in his work 160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People (2000). Others will be the meat-ridden painting and ideology of Francis Bacon, the relatable villainry and beaten heroins of Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke's idea of raping the audience into awariness, Antonin Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelties, Jordan Wolfson and his works of aestheticised violence, Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece' (1964) the follow up by Marina Abramovic's Rhythm O (1974), the work of the Japanese novelist of cruelty Yukio Mishima

or the documentary film-makers Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi who made the groundbreaking shock-doc Africa Blood and Guts (1966) and probably many others. I intend to add to this collection not only examples from high art and culture but also find examples from elsewhere. Such as the show Queen for a Day where women told their saddest story in order to win big prizes, or Natsubi a Japanese TV show where a man was stuck in a hotel room for 11 months before he was able to leave after winning over a million yen worth of paraphernalia.

I'll talk briefly about the transition the role of the 'artist' has made since the '70s. From being an outsider, exempt from certain morals or other rules, simply for being an artist, to now, the artist has to be a figurehead of morality. The outsider has become the example of what is good and right and is held to even higher standards than the audience.

I will furthermore try to further my understanding of the art that makes me and other morally uncomfortable. Think of catharsis theory and the theatre of cruelty. It has the risk of being a catalogue of these types of art and film. Furthermore, I believe the gathering of these types of works might reassure the reader that we all indeed, have the occasional urge

to injure or destroy. Maybe the human condition is steeped in suffering. And maybe that is not so bad.

I'd like to end with a final chapter about the relation the audience might have to these works. The paradoxical fascination with the morbid, violent and dangerous. Like the viewing of horror films expose us to the fascination-repulsion reflex we have with anything we might consider impure (existing in several categories at once) -- do we have a similar hate/love for works that deal with the representation of, or actually are, cruel. Is the audience made into a complicit bystander by simply looking at cruelty?

CONCLUSION

In the end, I intend to present a nuanced exploration of the artistic landscape, where I try to navigate and balance the strong ethical convictions one might have with my equally strong appreciation for work that tests limits. The limits of taboo, taste and permissibility. I aim to encourage the readers to suspend, at least for a while, whatever aversion or repulsion they might feel towards depictions of cruelty and towards artists who uses them to explore the capacity of humans for cruelty, to appreciate the efforts that might lead us into the unknown and untreated territory of the mind.

Whether or not the artistic portraiture of cruelty helps to assist in the catharsis which might reduce the presence of cruelty in human existence, or, works mimetically, making the world an even crueler place by its representation, I suspect I won't be able to answer.

But I do hope to instil in the reader the realisation that art and artists can shock us into reflections about the human condition we might not have been able to achieve in our daily lives. And that whatever distaste we may feel when these artists throw brutality in our faces, we might try to overcome our scruples and preconceived ideas and scoldings, and listen to what they are possibly trying to tell us.

Though I can't stress enough how difficult it might be to suspend pre-emptive ethical judgments (for most), to allow their aesthetic impact to spur unexpected (moral and emotional) questions. As that for me is the most important, to present a new way of looking and asking.

It is not my place to question whether the works I discuss in REAL CRUEL are 'wrong' nor do I intend to follow some type of Marxist criticism where I look at whose interests are served by this type of shock art. I won't say what's right nor what is true. Instead, I'll ask the key question 'What new thoughts does it make possible to think and 'What new emotions can be made possible to feel' 'What new sensations and perceptions? Because in the end -- the chase in answering these questions, of helping us to see or feel the world differently is how I would want to approach my art-making.

NASUBI
TV PROGRAM JAPANESE TV
1998



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Paglia, Camille - 'Provocations'

A manifest to fearless inquiry into whatever. Breaking open age-old taboos and lifting her status up as a provocateur pur sang.

Nelson, Maggie - 'The Art of Cruelty'

A compendium of thoughts, works and texts on cruelty. Asks questions if image-making of cruelty make us part of it. Not afraid to break open taboo, whilst being inquisitive and interested in not stepping over into idiot-cruelty.

Bandura, Albert - 'Moral Disengagement - How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves'

Textbook that asks the question: How do otherwise considerate human beings do cruel things and still live in peace with themselves?

Sontag, Susan - 'Regarding the Pain of Others' A series of analysis of how to picture suffering.
Nietzsche, Friedrich - 'Beyond Good and Evil'
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